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RABBIT-PEN CONSTRUCTION IN RELATION TO SORE HOCKS 1/

(Res)
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The term "sore hocks", as used by breeders of rabbits, refers to inflamed or ulcerous areas either on the under surface of the hind feet or on the pad and toes of the front feet, where also it may develop. Rabbits that are in a depleted physical condition, either from improper feeding or heavy production; those that are heavy; and the rapidly developing young are most susceptible. The padding wears off and exposes the skin, which becomes irritated by contact with the hard, rough surface of the hutch floor. The bare area becomes inflamed and abrasions occur in the skin, following which the tissues may become infected and abscesses form. Rabbits suffering from sore hocks raise and lower the affected feet in rapid, successive movements.

The type of hutch floor may be a contributing factor. Experimental studies conducted at the United States Rabbit Experiment Station at Fontana, California, have shown that 3/4 inch woven-wire nest floors may cause sore hocks. By using hardware-cloth floors with 5/8 inch mesh (17 gauge), fewer animals develop these ulcers. Stamped, smooth, metal floors eliminate the trouble almost entirely.

Insanitary conditions in the hutch aggravate inflammations of the hocks. Consequently, the self-cleaning type of floor is preferable, for it simplifies the problem of keeping the hutch clean. A portable self-cleaning lath platform should be placed in hutches equipped with floors of wire mesh or hardware-cloth, so that the animal may rest without the affected feet coming in contact with irritating surfaces. The platform should cover at least half the area of the floor. It may be constructed by placing two pieces of 3/4 by 1-1/2 inch boards on edge to form the ends, making the floor surface of lath, spaced 5/8 inch apart and nailed to the end pieces. The hutch should be thoroughly cleaned and kept in a sanitary condition.

Rabbits that show signs of tenderness in their feet should be examined. If the padding is wearing off or the skin is irritated, the animals should receive prompt attention. Solid-floor hutches should be well-bedded to keep the rabbits dry and clean.

1/ Formerly Wildlife Leaflet 242 issued in May 1943 by the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior.

Sore hocks may be treated quite successfully unless abscesses have formed. Adherent or adjacent matted hair should be clipped off; then the affected areas should be washed with warm soapy water, all loose scabs and debris being carefully removed. The parts should be dried well, and pine tar, zinc ointment, or iodine ointment applied every other day until healing is well under way. Treatment with iodine has a disadvantage, that it stains the fur. Healing will take place more readily if the rabbit is confined in a pen on well-drained clean soil. In such a pen mild cases of sore hocks will often heal without medical treatment.

In the more serious cases, where abscesses have formed, it is best to destroy the animals unless they represent especially valuable breeding lines. When it is deemed advisable to treat these advanced cases, the affected animals should be isolated in order to help prevent the spread of the infection throughout the herd. The abscesses should be freely lanced, opening them to the bottom of the cavity, to insure proper drainage. Express as much pus as possible and flush out the cavity with any mild disinfectant solution or soapy water. The cavity should then be thoroughly, but gently, swabbed with pledgets of cotton saturated in tincture of iodine. Examine the animals every other day to see that proper drainage is taking place and repeat the treatment as long as pus formation continues. Healing, to be permanent, must occur from the bottom of the cavity outward.

Treated rabbits should be confined to pens set on well-drained, clean soil rather than on a hard surface and the abscesses will heal more rapidly there. When the animals are confined in a pen of this type, the sore hocks uncomplicated by abscesses will require no medication. Chronic cases respond rather slowly to treatment.

Sore hocks will respond better to treatment if the rabbits are fed a properly balanced ration. This should be composed of grains, a plant protein supplement, a good quality legume hay, green food or root crops, and salt.

Rabbits should not be mated until all inflammation has disappeared and the infection area healed.

